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ABSTRACT

A composition teacher's suggestion to students to read personal compositions to others and to act on their reactions took on new meaning when the teacher read his own works to a writer's group. The teacher then began to realize the real implications of this method for writing instruction. Student reactions to their classmates' compositions can lead to measurably improved writing. But as important as these specific gains are, the real value of bringing the writer's group into the classroom is what this conveys about writing as a social act. Writing is both the loneliest and most communal of all endeavors. Teachers should allow students to discover the pleasures of reading aloud to and hearing responses from a group of committed writers. Students should have the opportunity to see that the solitude of individual effort can be balanced by the voices of others in a conversation that engages students and teachers alike. (SG)

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Connecting My Writer's Group and My Writing Class

When several friends and fellow grad students proposed that we begin a writer's group, I consented immediately. But I felt uneasy and wasn't sure why. I knew nearly everyone invited to our first meeting, so I had no reason to hesitate. And as a teacher, I have for years insisted that students go public with their work in class. Why would I be reluctant to follow my own pedagogy?

I was spooked by the thought that these instant critics would be responding immediately to my work--without allowing the subtlety to sink in. I would be compelled to answer on the spot for what I had written. I could neither pack it off to an editor like a message in a bottle nor release it to the reading public to take flight or falter in obscurity. Instead, I would hear myself read it, and others would listen and comment immediately. This was an experience not even graduate school had prepared me for.

The truth is that I had usually worked alone, cloistered in my room, struggling to locate my own wavering frequency. I imagined myself, in Linda Brodkey's words, as "a solitary writer alone in a cold garret working into the small hours of the morning by the thin light of a candle" (396). I turned down the brightness of my computer screen when others approached. Over-the-shoulder readers seemed to me no better than back-seat drivers. The isolation chamber, the remote shack in the hills, the deepest recesses of the largest library: work settings like those held great appeal for me. I was the one who

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slid my paper beneath the stack and hustled away from the teacher, fearful that she would read and grade it instantaneously.

But I dug out a poem, "October at the Beach," to read at our meeting. It was a brief, rather unambitious effort that had languished in my bottom drawer for a year or so. I guess I chose that one because I considered it finished--not very good, but finished. And it was safe: not too personal, not something I was struggling with currently. If my listeners didn't like it, I could toss it back in that bottom drawer and forget about it.

At our first meeting several others read poems and stories. Then my turn came, and I read "October at the Beach:"

> The ocean's hunger
> is what I notice, not
> the old titanic cliches:
> gulls and solitude
> and floating bottles.

And so on. In the ensuing discussion, one or two participants noted cliches that, despite line three, had crept into the poem. There was an allusion to the fall of Icarus, for example, that in retrospect makes me cringe. As group reactions continued, I began to think the others were taking my work more seriously than I did. Then when someone asked where I planned to send the revised poem, I was sure of it. So I learned something at that first meeting: never solicit group comments on a piece that you believe is already finished or beyond redemption or shelved for good. Read something you feel strongly about, whatever its imperfections. I decided that if I trusted the others

to be respondents as well as listeners, I should give them something I am actively working on.

There is a corollary to this principle--one that has some bearing on applying the writer's group approach to the classroom: if others take your work seriously, you're likely to do so yourself. That is, it's possible for your respondents and critics to dramatize the importance of what you're doing, to make it come alive as real writing for a real audience. Our students particularly need this experience. This didn't happen with my poem because I had already relegated it to the past; I was too far away from it. For our next meeting I resolved to bring something recent, something I still had an investment in.

What to write? My mind and desk were hopelessly cluttered with student papers. Driving home one day, in a sort of game with myself, I decided to grab the next unusual sight as the topic for an essay. I noticed a single shoe, a weathered brogan, on the side of the road. I had seen countless discarded shoes in my day but until then never gave them a thought. Suddenly, the possibilities hit me like a firehose, and I floored the accelerator, anxious to get home, and isolate myself with our IBM Selectric. The resulting uncharacteristic spillage of ideas and ink became "Sole Searching," in which I speculate on how the shoes that litter our highways get there. I conclude that "if we could somehow delve into their histories, these subliminal blurs on our roads could prove to be windows to our national sole."

Group reactions to this essay were congenial if not enthusiastic. I raked in the suggestions like so many poker chips and a few days later tried my luck in placing the revised version with the local Sunday newsmagazine. The editor took it.

Without the Writer's Group, I would never have written "Sole Searching." I realized that this band of committed writers and critics could motivate me. I had long since assumed that real writers write for real audiences and had repeated that like a mantra for my students. But now this incantation took on new meaning.

I began to consider the implications of this revelation for my writing classes. Our class workshop sessions had most often taken the form of peer group work, with students in clusters of four or five. Or, I would have individuals read portions of their completed or nearly-completed papers to the class, asking for reactions. I had kept this rather spontaneous and had made these activities tangential to other concerns of the class.

The Writing Group persuaded me that student work should be central to the course, something I had long acknowledged but hadn't fully acted on. I began to designate students to bring in drafts each week, with enough copies for everyone. I had each featured writer read a aloud. We then took a couple minutes to review it silently, formulating questions and responses before launching into class discussion. I continue to use peer groups on occasion, but the total concentration of class energy on one piece at a time has heightened the value of workshop sessions, partly because when students know 20 other writers will read and carefully critique a draft, they are compelled to take their work seriously, honing it for an audience of peers.

At one evening writer's group meeting, I found that when you ask for comments on a poem, you relinquish some control over it. I read the group a poem called "High Jumping," based on my memory of a high jumping bar some friends and I constructed when we were young. I imagined that years afterward, my father recycled the same materials as a trellis for his bean vines. I liked the poem and was eager to hear

responses to it. Gordon commented first: "What I find most interesting here is the strong phallic imagery." Others nodded and wondered aloud whether the references to "poles" and "shafts" should be so blatant, whether I was overplaying the machismo. I listened to these responses with growing discomfort. I was completely unaware of these images but upon rereading the poem had to admit they were there. The group had naturally appropriated the poem as its own, and I had to reckon with their observations.

The writer reading to a receptive audience relinquishes some control, while the group gains some power--and a measure of responsibility. I want to bring this principle into the classroom as well. I want my students to believe that you should be committed to what you ask others to comment on. At the same time, in its role as collective respondent, critic, editor, and audience, the group is obligated to be honest and thorough. It must exercise some ownership responsibilities.

On occasion, exerting ownership is a real challenge: in the writer's group, if a story, poem, or essay knocks our socks off, all we can say is "Wow!" This doesn't happen often--maybe once a year. Chris Schreiner did it with "Hobby Deep in Hudson Bay," a story he read to us at the first meeting he attended. He brought with him a voice we had never heard before and a cast of crazies out of the Canadian wilderness--which he had never visited. And it happened when Judith Hiott announced she had begun translating Ovid's Amores and read to us,

> Every lover's a soldier; Cupid's troops never dodder.
> Believe me, Atticus, every lover is cannon fodder.
> The green age for war agrees
> also with love: fighting geezers

are vile; randy wheezers are treason.

The want of seasons

Leaders seek in bold soldiers handsome girls

hold dear drafting churls

for their flanks. Both lovers and soldiers keep

vigil by night. The ground's where both sleep,

one by his sweetie's door, one by the general's.

She went on for several pages, and we were transfixed. We had quibbles, but not many, and Judith's efforts went down in the annals of our writing group not only as the first translation but also as one of the few poems we were unanimously willing to swallow whole.

When my class struggles to formulate a response to a student paper or when one supportive soul says, "I wouldn't change a word!" I seldom agree, but I try at those moments to recall occasions when our writer's group has been handed a little work of art on a platter and has wished only for the luxury of savoring it.

When my classes function as a writer's group, I most relish the times when responses to a draft lead to measurably improved writing--and when the others can see for themselves this gratifying end product, which they are partly responsible for. One freshman composition student brought in an essay about paintball, a militaristic game in which teams of well-armed weekend warriors stalk one another with guns that shoot paint capsules instead of real bullets. The assignment was to do a sort of feature article on some new phenomenon, form of recreation, or popular trend. Tracy's enthusiasm for paintball extended to playing the game himself one Saturday, and he

came in with an informative piece that began this way:

> The sport has been called the ultimate game, gotcha, survivor, capture the flag, and paintball. In America some three million people are regular players and over five thousand new players step onto a field for the first time each week. But just where did this phenomenon come from?

Students in our class complimented him on the opening sentence and the startling statistics in the second sentence. Few of us had ever heard of this new pasttime. But the sudden question in sentence four left us cold, and we agreed that we weren't yet interested enough to wonder about the sport's origins. It needed something. Then one student came up with what in retrospect seem obvious questions: What's it like to be out there playing? Is it play or is it war? Or something in between? If I had been the sole respondent to this draft, I'm not sure I would have thought to ask those questions. Class members challenged him to bring us the experience of paintball, not just a string of statistics. Here's the revised opening:

> The remnants of what was once Alpha team gathered on the ridge east of the valley. They had taken five casualties in the last skirmish, a heavy blow to the twelve-man team, but rumors speculated that the opposition was down just as many. They took a defensive position facing the downslope to give the ammo that extra foot or two of range that could be crucial to their survival. As they settled in to wait, they heard the crackling of guns to the sharp right. Before the team commander could take cover, he felt a blistering sting on his back. He reached his hand around to feel where he had been shot. When he brought it back it was colored red. He had been eliminated.

An excerpt from a World War II novel? A Vietnam flashback? Your grandfather's favorite Korean war story? Not really. It's paintball.

I'm delighted with all student writing that--like Tracy's-- is unquestionably improved following class response, just as I feel some pride when a poem or story from our writer's group is published. But as important as these specific gains are, the real value of bringing the writer's group into the classroom is what this conveys about writing as a social act. Writing is both the loneliest and the most communal of endeavors. Linda Brodkey challenges us to renounce the lonely garret as the prototypical "scene" of writing and instead to envision writing in the context of a community. And Ann Ruggles Gere, in Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications, reminds us that writing groups have a long and distinguished history dating from well back into the nineteenth century.

As I make my students a part of this history, I want them to discover the pleasures of reading aloud to and hearing responses from a group of committed writers. I want them to see that the solitude of individual effort is balanced by the voices of others in this conversation that engages all of us--students and teachers alike.

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